Sunday, November 1, 2026
Sermon: "Lead Courageously"
Joshua 1:5-9, Ephesians 6:10-18 NRSV

Where we are going in today's message: Leaning on the promise of God's presence and the empowering of the Holy Spirit, disciples find the strength to lead courageously. Whether we lead from the front, from the middle, or from a distance, our call is to go out to the margins where God's work is being done.

In the first scripture read, Joshua stands on the brink of an envisioned future, a promised future. But he stands alone. His mentor, Moses, the one who called him out of the mass of the wandering people, is gone. Joshua was sure he would live forever. Moses had that vibe. He was just always going to be around, to defer to, to lean on, to show the way. But now he was gone, and Joshua stands alone, wondering, needing…something. But what?

What does any leader need to proceed into the unknown future? The bishops suggest that at least one thing that is needed is courage. That's why they conclude their vision statement with a call to Lead Courageously. No one would argue that to be sure. But where does this adverbial quality come from? Most of us would assume it comes from within. It is a call to "man up" in modern parlance. Or like Lady MacBeth tells her husband when he wavers on the mission to kill the king and take the throne and wonders if he might fail: "*then we fail! But screw up your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail!*" (Macbeth Act 1, Scene 7)

We might say it more simply these days, guided by a certain shoe manufacturer: "Just do it!" The sticking place is where the arrow finds purchase in the target. It is where it all happens, where it comes to be. When we find ourselves there, when we are driven by the goal, by the target, by the task itself, then courage is generated through an act of will or inner glandular response. Well, maybe. Certainly, there is a human component to the ability to act courageously. But our texts suggest another source.

Joshua might have felt alone as he stood there without Moses contemplating all that was before him. But the text reminds him and us that he isn't. "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you," says the

Lord. (Joshua 1:5 NRSV) "I will not fail you or forsake you." Presence, that is the beginning of courage. From the realization that the leader is not alone comes the ability to move forward, to make decisions, to do what needs to be done. Courage is the ability to act even in the face of the unknown.

There is a second component to courage in the Joshua text. "Only be strong and very courageous, being care to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you…" (Joshua 1:7 NRSV) Obedience is that second component that helps to generate the ability to lead courageously. Not a slavish obedience to a list of laws and procedures. But rather a relational knowledge of the vision of the people of God that has been cast in the commandments. Joshua is encouraged to meditate on this law, to know it intimately so that it becomes a part of him and he acts, he leads and chooses, not because it is written in a law, but because it is following the one who is present with him and equips him to lead.

That equipping is what Paul turns to in the famous passage itemizing the whole armor of God. There are plenty of commentaries that will examine each element of the armor and give insight into how it can help in moving forward in faith, to lead courageously. In this space let us draw attention to the fact that all these individual pieces are defensive, except for one. The bulk of the items mentioned here are about protection. They are about holding on to faith in difficult days. They are about being reminded that the work that lies ahead is not simply our work, not simply the church's work. It is God's work and God chooses to use us as instruments in the building up of the kingdom, in the creating of the kin-dom of faith and fellowship. We lead courageously when we acknowledge God's presence in our work and do all we can do to point beyond ourselves to the God who sustains us.

As for the offensive tools? Well, Paul only mentions one, the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. It is interesting that he gives two names or descriptions for this one. It's almost as if he had an inkling of the trouble this might cause. Perhaps he had a vision of people wielding scripture like it was a weapon designed to wound, to cut people down, to destroy enemies. So, he doesn't start with

scripture as weapon. He starts with the Spirit. It is the Spirit who wields the sword, not us. If there is any cutting down to be done, it is not our job, not our responsibility. It is the Spirit that convicts. Our job is to love. Our job is to welcome and include and bring folks into the fellowship of the people who are shaped by the word.

Our job, says Paul, is to pray at all times, and to lift up God's people in prayer. Our job is to lead courageously as we find new ways to be the people of God at work in the world. Our job is to lead courageously as we find new arenas and new people to hear the good news of God's grace. Our job is to lead courageously as we humbly follow the one who sends us out to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

But where might we start to lead? Or what ought to be our priorities? The bishops challenge us to think beyond being courageous in our local churches, and even in our local communities. We are encouraged to take a world view, a systemic view when we consider how to lead courageously. We are encouraged to take an Isaiah like vision and to let our worship and our spiritual discipline reach into the world around us, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. (Isaiah 58:6 NRSV)

A high and difficult calling, to be sure. And yet this is who we have always been. Our founder, John Welsey, from the beginnings of the Methodist movement set about challenging the oppressive systems on his time, sought to lift those marginalized by industrialization and unfair and unsustainable labor practices. We have always been a church who sought to bring transformation to the world, not simply of individuals or of the church. Our baptism vows call us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. To lead courageously is to acknowledge that this vow is not only about protecting ourselves, but about challenging those powers at work in the world and to invite others to find the freedom that Christ can bring.

Even here, especially here, in the hard labor of leading the church courageously, God will meet us, will make the divine presence known and thus strengthen our courage as we seek to do

what seems impossible for us. And the light we follow begins to shine in and through us, that might all the more love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously. Alleluia, Amen.